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DISTRICT  
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# Blowsand Reader

VOLUME 12

ISSUE 3

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2016

## Superintendent's News

By Garratt Aitchison, District Superintendent

I saw a few new toys out here over the holiday, so it appears that some of you were on Santa's "nice" list. It was great to see the park full of families, enjoying this incredible place. I really want to thank the staff for doing such a great job day in and day out. Their efforts were obvious to the visitors, as indicated by the steady stream of compliments received—and thank you to those visitors that took the time to express your appreciation. Those of you that know me, know that I have always said that our staff is our most valuable resource. The Ocotillo Wells District, from park aides to managers, are an exceptional team of employees that are unified in their approach to providing the very best recreational experience while at the same time ensuring that the resources that make this desert so unique are conserved for future generations.

With that being said, in case some of you haven't heard, the California Fish and Game Commission recently voted not to list the flat-tailed horned lizard as an endangered or threatened species. Although Ocotillo Wells SVRA is only one small piece of the habitat puzzle, I know that the efforts of all of our staff and the stewardship of our visitors played a role in this appropriate decision. Waiting out the decision over the last two seasons put a damper on special events and park projects. However, now that an official decision has been made, we are all looking forward to resuming our regular activities.

Now, back to our most valuable resource. I share with you a



Baby Borello wants a ride

(Continued on next page...)

## Superintendent's News *continued...*

few photos of our annual meeting where we share stories, plan projects, and recognize accomplishments.



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# State Parks Transform

By Garratt Aitchison, District Superintendent

The Department just completed its two-year cycle of identifying and implementing several initiatives that were developed as part of the Parks Forward Commission recommendations in 2014. Its recommendations helped pave the way for transformational change that includes everything from Department processes to delivery of service to visitors. As the Department works through implementing and adjusting these initiatives state-wide, the Ocotillo Wells District relied heavily on Melony Light (Staff Services Analyst) and Jeff Price (State Park Interpreter) to keep all of the District staff informed and involved. Below are just a few of the initiatives that have been completed or are well underway.

**Service Based Budgeting:** Park staff drilled down to the “task” level in all of our core program areas, in part to get a more accurate look at what we are able to accomplish with our current budgets, as well as to see how we can become more efficient in our delivery of service to the public as we focus on the Department’s mission and legislative mandates.

**Leadership Development:** The Department has created a new District Superintendent classification, developed a multi-phase leadership training, and streamlined the testing and hiring process in an effort to allow greater opportunities for all employees as they navigate the career ladder.

**Organizational Structure:** An ongoing initiative is considering how to best structure our 280 park units across the state so that we, as a Department, can deliver the most efficient and effective service. This includes the service that each unit receives from our Headquarters staff to the service we provide to the park and its visitor.

**Camping Reservations:** Although not a big issue at Ocotillo Wells or Heber Dunes SVRAs, this new system is one that I am excited about. For those of you that have struggled with State Parks’ earlier editions of the reservation system, this one has great potential to be user-friendly for both the visitor and employee.

**Partnerships:** State Parks has always relied heavily on partnering with a variety of individuals and groups to make California’s state park system among the best in the country. This initiative builds upon that and has resulted in partnering with colleges, private enterprise, and non-profits. Among other benefits, these efforts will improve park research and develop stable funding sources.



Jeff Price and Melony Light discuss initiatives during an all-hands meeting



# First Day Ride...Celebrating a New Beginning!

By Sharon Weil, State Park Interpreter I

The Ocotillo Wells 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual First Day Ride was a huge success! More than 418 visitors participated in this family-oriented festival that celebrated the beginning of the 2017 new year! Visitors started off the event by taking an OHV ride with family and friends to explore Ocotillo Wells SVRA. Once their First Day adventure was completed, participants returned to the Discovery Center for a variety of fun-filled family activities, including mapping their morning ride on a large park map. Collectively, riders logged more than 2,090 miles.

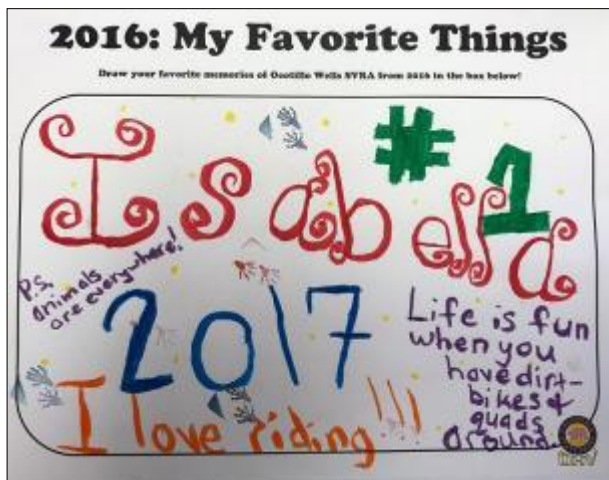


The event had an OHV safety focus and included various games and activities. Interpretive staff interacted with visitors, emphasizing messages about riding safety, park rules, the proper use of hand signals when on the trail, safety gear and equipment.



To celebrate 2016, attendees created their very own “meal-time” place mats that reflected the significance of Ocotillo Wells SVRA in their lives. Visitors created colorful artwork depicting many favorite recollections of the past year including OW destinations, riding adventures, the park’s night sky, desert animals, their family campsite, as well as many other significant memories from their 2016 visits to Ocotillo Wells.

To conclude the celebration, families were treated to an old-fashioned chilidog BBQ sponsored by the Friends of Ocotillo Wells. It was a great opportunity for visitors to slow down and share quality time with friends and family. All in all, the First Day Ride event was a great way to “RIDE-ON” into 2017!



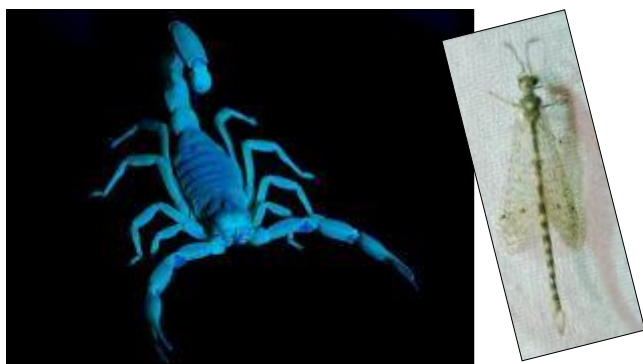
# OW Festivals

By Ittai Levine, Senior Park Aide, Interpretation

Come experience the adventure of our upcoming festivals! First, explore the wonders of what's happening right below your feet during our Geology Daze! On February 18-20, unleash your inner geologist and visit your favorite places like Blowsand Hill, Shell Reef, Pumpkin Patch, and Gas Domes to take a peek at some of the geological wonders of Ocotillo Wells.

The future is here! Look no further because on March 25 you can enjoy the future during our Astronomy Festival! There will be all sorts of activities, such as exploring space, and rocket building and launching! Get set for some surprise guest speakers!

On Saturday, April 1, you can discover the amazing creatures at the Bug-A-Palooza and Scorpion Safari, where you can see live critters during the day and hunt for wild ones at night!



You're going to love it, no joke! And spring is in the air on April 16, so come join us for our Springtime Celebration! There will be something fun for everyone with games such as "match the eggs," bingo, egg hunting, and much more!

**Stop by the  
Discovery Center  
for more details!**





# Muds and Floods!

By Steve Thompson, Senior Park Aide, Interpretation

It is a magical time of the year when water vapor condenses and falls as rain to the desert floor. A time for celebration, a time for joy, and a time for all desert dwellers to get a little muddy! The life-giving force of water rejuvenates plants and invigorates all the critters in OW, humans being no exception, towards action and movement. For our visitors that means quite a few things...some decide that driving through that mud hole isn't the best idea, while others feel that their new purpose in life is to go through every last one. Some like our friends seen here enjoy a more hands-on approach to enjoying this rare sight.



Joyous is the day when rain quenches the thirst of our dry lands, but it is also a time to be aware of our surroundings. Rain can rejuvenate much out here, but it can also be a devastating force. Where washes can be overflowing within minutes, ripping apart banks, and pushing down trees, water is not a trifling matter. According to the National Weather Service, since 1960, flash floods have claimed more than 300 lives in California, with more than half being vehicle-related. A foot of flowing water, on average, can exert a force of 500 pounds; this is enough to wash away even SUVs and pick-ups.

While we all enjoy the wet weather, we can keep alert. Check weather reports for surrounding areas that drain into OW. The storms could be happening miles away, but we could still encounter flash floods. If there is water flowing across roadways, Turn Around, Don't Drown!



## Meet Kent Miller, Superintendent II

My name is Kent Miller and I joined OW in February of 2016 as the Heber Dunes/Ocotillo Wells District Public Safety Superintendent. I grew up in Vista and camped in the desert with my family as a child. I earned a geology degree at California Lutheran University. At the beginning of my career, I worked for several law enforcement agencies. I was an Explorer with San Diego County Sheriff's Department, a college Cadet with Ventura County Sheriff, and a jail deputy with Ventura. I also worked for Ventura County Probation as a felony investigator for a wide range of crimes

After meeting some park rangers at Point Mugu State Park, I knew that California State Parks was the place that I wanted to dedicate my career—I wanted to protect the people who visit the parks, protect the parks and work out in nature. I started as a docent volunteer at Point Mugu doing interpretive programs. While waiting for my background investigation to become a ranger, I also worked a season as a park aide in the kiosk at Leo Carillo State Beach.

After attending the academy in 2000, I began as a ranger at Hungry Valley SVRA. I transferred to Ocotillo Wells in 2004 because my family was in San Diego. I promoted to a position in the Colorado Desert District in 2007, then returned to Hungry Valley, but I was fortunate to be able to return once again to Ocotillo Wells.

If you have not yet guessed, I am a science nerd, especially when it comes to geology and meteorology. If you doubt this, just stop by my office and see what I have on my desk. I spend as much time as possible outside. I even do some gem mining. Finally, I want to thank the staff from the managers at the District Office, to the rangers, to the park aides in the field helping the visitors enjoy their off-highway experience. You all have created an amazing place to be!



## Salton Sea SRA

By Jose Renteria, Senior Park Aide

The season is in full swing at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area! Several thousand folks have come in and out of our visitor center to learn much about this fascinating lake. They are usually pleasantly surprised that there are many birds that call this place home or use it as a full fish buffet. Many activities have been enjoyed either on foot or in open water. In fact, November welcomed several hundred French women athletes paddling out on the water as part of their California athletic tour. However it's done, exploring the entire fascinating world of the Salton Sea is never a one-day event!

# Kids' Adventure Connection 2017 Motto ...

By Jan Naragon, Senior Park Aide, Interpretation

Thirty-nine kids ages two to 17 trained to become desert weather detectives at our Fourth Annual Kids' Adventure Connection campout event the weekend of January 14-15. And, boy, did they have plenty of clues after the previous week's incessant rain! Fortunately, the young ones and their parents took the favorable forecasts at their word and enjoyed a perfect weekend of exploring wonders brought on by wind and water in OWSVRA and other nearby spots.

Kids' Adventure Connection follows the directives set forth in OW's take on the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, which lays out ten things kids should experience by age 12—playing in a safe place, connecting with the past, planting a seed, following a trail, exploring nature, and camping under the stars, to name a few. The overarching theme of weather sleuthing was to celebrate the varied and extreme desert landscapes and skies related to weather.



and activities showing how weather can affect enjoyment of the Park and safe travel within it. We explored messages to read in gnarly- and innocent-looking clouds. We assembled and flew simple kites. We split up into trail-riding and hiking groups on scavenger hunts to find evidence of weather-related changes ancient and recent. The hiking group followed the muddier-than-usual Slot canyon in nearby Anza-Borrego Desert State Park (and some wanted to do it again the next day).



OW Ranger Angelica Rios and her K-9 companion, Halo the German Shepherd, surprised the kids for an hour of learning about how they became a team at OW, with lots of time for questions and doggie belly-rubbing! After a wonderful grilled burger dinner, kids had a blast at a special

*(Continued on next page...)*



## ... “Let’s Get Cirrus!”



stargazing show under the moonless desert sky. Campfires and s’mores completed the traditional first evening.

Sunday morning dawned clear. Kids of ALL ages made mini-water-cycle terrariums to take home—planting bean, pea, and lettuce seeds.



The terrariums were the first attempt at growing food for many in the crowd. Noted Jan Naragon, “They asked great questions about how the plants would get oxygen and why they might not need to water their little gardens. They’ll each have a living, growing memory of the weekend.”



The Third Annual KAC Super Bowl completed the event. At the Sunday morning wrap-up, Sharon Weil polled the kids about their favorite activity. “They seemed to enjoy all events more or less equally during the jam-packed weekend,” she said.

OW event co-conspirators would like to thank their coworkers on the OW staff, including Kitty Gravett and her family who barbecued the burgers.

Big applause is also in order for our tireless youth volunteers and parents who supported the successful detective work in countless ways—both prior to and during the fun. Special thanks to Boll Weevil Restaurant in Lakeside for supporting the kids’ breakfast fixin’s.



Get on our e-mail list for early notice for next year’s Kids’ Adventure Connection! Stop by the Discovery Center or at any weekend information tent to sign up for weekly updates on this and other special kids’ events.



# Invasive Plant Council Symposium

By Danny McCamish, Environmental Scientist

Staff from the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division (OHV) attended the 2016 California Invasive Plant Council Symposium held on November 4-5 at the Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite. Ocotillo Wells was represented by Environmental Scientist Danny McCamish. Danny and staff from four OHV districts presented informational panels that showcased invasive plant management projects at their respective parks.

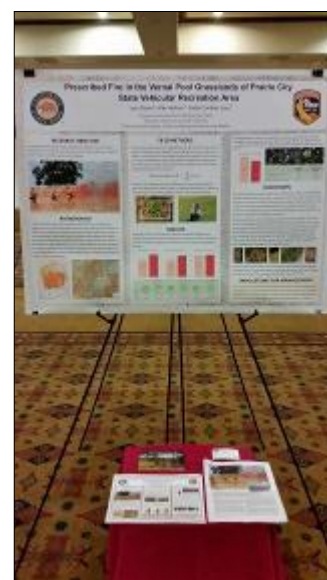
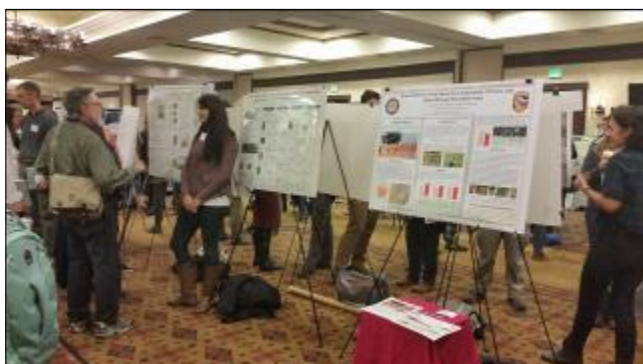
Poster presentations included:

- Integrated pest management for Dalmatian toadflax (*Linaria dalmatica*) at Hungry Valley State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA)
- Russian wheatgrass (*Thinopyrum junceiforme*) treatment at Oceano Dunes SVRA
- Controlled burning for Medusa head (*Elymus caput-medusae*) at Prairie City SVRA
- Tamarisk (*Tamarix ssp.*) removal at Ocotillo Wells SVRA

Ocotillo Wells has been involved in a large and ongoing tamarisk removal project since 1998, focused within the park to reduce our tamarisk invasion. From 2011 to 2013 OW engaged in park-wide mapping and herbicide applications on target tamarisk species, specifically in its eastern washes. After herbicide application was completed, mapping and surveys from 2015 provide data suggesting only 7-10% of targeted and treated tamarisk stands remained viable. Regrowth and sprouting from newly-grown stands were not counted as part of this test.

After almost three years of land rest, the OW Resources staff is gearing up to resume tamarisk removal, targeting previously-treated stands that remain and new growth that has occurred since our last treatment efforts. Don't forget to look out for Resources crews as you ride and

recreate this spring. Know that staff members are helping to reduce invasive species in our park.





# Wildflower Update

By Jan Naragon, Senior Park Aide, Interpretation

Nearly a year's worth of rain fell since the beginning of January, and the desert is responding with a surge of greenery, from tiny sprouts to ocotillo forests bursting with possibilities. There's snow in the peninsular range, but the brittlebushes (*Encelia farinosa*) near the Discovery Center are leading the wildflower pack with their cheerful yellow. The spiky stalks of unassuming violet flowers of desert lavender (*Hyptis emoryi*), a member of the mint family, already hosts bees. Enjoy the

fragrance—bees will move aside for you.



Ocotillo canes (*Fouquieria splendens*) have morphed quickly from prickly sticks to green fireworks, exploding within three days after a rain. These plants absorb most of their water through their canes rather than through their roots—a great adaptation for the Colorado Desert. Here in the park, ocotillos prefer soil dominated by granite particles. There's a splendid granite-inspired patch at the foot of East Butte along the Goat Trail.

We've seen a bumper crop of wavy-leaved desert lily plants (*Hesperocallis undulata*) along Pole Line Road. The bulbs of these rough-and-tough plants send up blooms only in wet years. Their bulbs may be two feet below the surface of the sand to avoid hungry rodents and even summer monsoons. No

flower stalks yet, but we'll be watching to see how tall they grow after so much winter rain—possibly up to six feet!



Green “shadows” of tiny annual seedlings have been spotted on the downstream side of dormant bushes, especially along small washes.

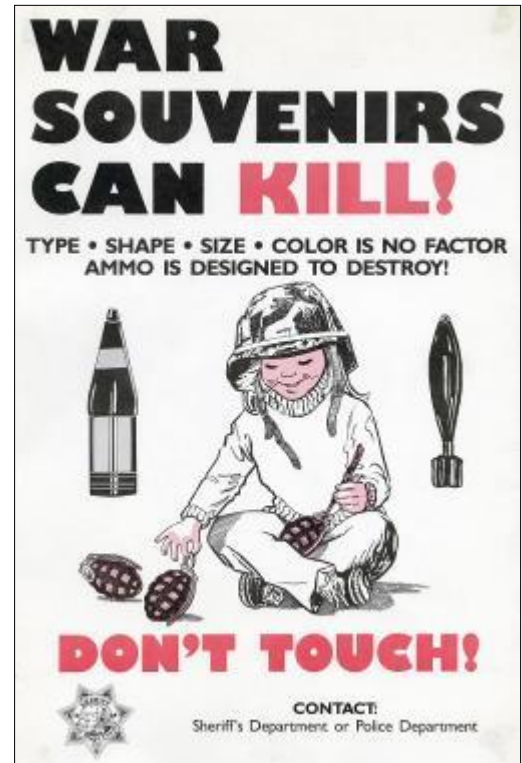
We'll keep you posted as they show their true forms and colors.



# Relic Ammunition Can Be Dangerous!

Over the past month, several pieces of ordnance have been reported within OW. Old shells, bombs and other ammunition may look harmless, but they can be dangerous! Please do NOT disturb them. Play it safe! Take a photo and a GPS reading, if you can, or be ready to provide a good description of the location. Immediately report your findings to the Rangers or a member of the staff. The Rangers will check it out, and, if necessary, call in the bomb squad to detonate the ammunition.

During World War II, the Armed Forces trained in the Borrego Valley for combat against the Germans and Italians. The rugged desert terrain was similar to that of North Africa, making this area a perfect place to train the troops heading overseas. Navy planes bombed practice targets throughout the area, while Army and Marine units practiced anti-aircraft artillery fire and combat maneuvers. Later, Caltech tested early rockets in the area for military high-tech research programs. Over time, these relics erode out, presenting a possible danger to Park visitors. Please stay safe!



## Meet Desiree ...

My name is Desiree Varela. I was born and raised in Brawley, CA. I'm a Mom to a 7-month old baby boy named Joseph, and I'm a huge Patriots fan! I enjoy a good workout, especially outdoors with my little guy.

I'm currently attending the University of Phoenix to pursue a B.A. in Accounting with a Minor in Business. Upon graduation, I plan to further my career with the State of California as an Accountant. I now join the Ocotillo Wells team as an Office Technician for the Auto Department, and am excited to take the first steps of my career with State Parks.



# Just Another Day in the Discovery Center

By Eileen Napoleon, Senior Park Aide, Interpretation

On Monday, December 26 and Tuesday, December 27, I worked in the Discovery Center as I always do on Mondays and Tuesdays. On those days, Christmas visitors were getting ready to leave, and New Year's visitors were arriving for the upcoming holiday weekend. Over those two days, almost every visitor told me how much they love this park, how clean it is, how much they appreciate the signage, the clean restrooms, the trash receptacles, the friendly staff, the displays in the Discovery Center, and the education programs offered at various park destinations. Really, it was overwhelming to hear so many positive comments over and over again from so many different people.



Some of the visitors, who have been visiting other off-road parks in Southern California, told me how much nicer our park is in every way, and that they definitely plan to come back to OW. Some visitors shared that they have been coming to our park with their families for many years, and plan to continue. Other visitors have only recently discovered our park, and they are so impressed, they plan to keep coming back.

A week later, on Monday, January 2, many of our visitors told me, "we are here for the first time." We seem to be getting a lot of first time visitors. Perhaps the word is getting around that we are a great park.

## Meet Martha ...

My name is Martha Hernandez. I live in Borrego Springs and I have three beautiful kids. In my free time I enjoy spending time with my children. I also like working outside. The Housekeeping Staff welcomes Martha to their team.



# OW Maintenance News



By Alfredo Jacobo, Park Maintenance Supervisor

A Toner residence is undergoing a few upgrades. Before installing the new kitchen cabinets, the studs in the kitchen walls had to be reinforced so they could support the weight of the new cabinets. The employees involved in this project were Jeff Smith, Gary Andrews and Cesar Rodriguez.



## Toner Holmes Camp Water Pipeline Interconnection Project

In late November and early December, the Maintenance crew worked on a project that will connect the Holmes Camp and Toner water systems together to create a back-up/redundancy system. This will allow the District water operator, Chad Van Doren, to take either service offline and keep the District supplied with water while he is doing the necessary work.



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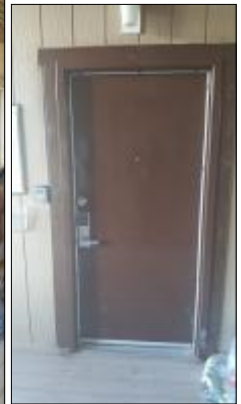


# OW Maintenance News *continued...*



## The Ranger's office receives a new entrance door.

Jeff Smith and Gary Andrews worked on this project.



## OWSVRA Fire Team Assists with Prescribed Burn

On December 14, 2016, the Ocotillo Wells SVRA Fire Team was invited to assist Colorado Desert District with an 88-acre prescribed burn at Middle Peak in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park. This was a reforestation project to restore natural tree populations destroyed after the Cedar fire. The team consisted of Don Solleder (Crew Boss), Alfredo Jacobo, Eric Dahl and Anthony Beepath. Several other fire departments participated with Parks under the direction and leadership of Cal Fire.

The team used drip torches and flares to ignite the fire. Ocotillo Wells also assisted by providing use of our 4000-gallon water truck. The successful burn took ten hours.



# Heber Dunes Happenings

By Jaime Mendez, State Park Interpreter I

Heber Dunes' stocking was brimming with good cheer this year. Not only did the Afterschool Junior Rangers at Hedricks Elementary school, but also the Desert Gardens' ASES students (105 students and teachers in all), had the opportunity to meet "Star Man" Steve Thompson, OW Night Sky Interpreter, (from Planet OW in the Far Out Galaxy) and gaze through his telescopes. The "Star Man" didn't let an overcast sky stop him from sharing the wonders of the universe with 105 fascinated students and teachers. Star Base Desert Gardens kept young passengers busy with space crafts and tours through the Nebula and Space Stamp History galleries as they waited patiently for their "flight" to be called. Junior Ranger "planets" checked boarding passes as the excited passengers queued up to board their space flight piloted by Space Man Steve. All landed safely from their trip where no one had ever gone before!



Back at the park—staff welcomed Shawn Colby as Heber's new Park Interpretive Specialist. Shawn has been busy from day one, assisting OW Interpretive staff over the New Year's weekend, followed by a full week at Heber assisting with Afterschool Junior Ranger Clubs and ATV Safety classes. To learn more about Shawn, check out his bio on the next page.

Heber's ATV safety instructor, Jim Rue, rang in the New Year with a record 20 students completing their ASI Safety Course, followed on Sunday January 8 with a Second Sunday Family ride (all riders were part of the Castro family). It's not every day that a tractor truck arrives at Heber with a flatbed full of ATVs!

Mid-January found Heber's new conference room filled for the first time with staff from OW

and Heber scoping out the details of a dedicated Discovery Center for the park.



What an exciting way to kick off the New Year!

*(Continued on next page...)*



## Heber Dunes Happenings *continued...*



## Meet Shawn ...

My name is Shawn Colby. I was born and raised in the Imperial Valley where I attended Imperial Valley College, earning my A.S. in general science. After completing my A.S., I transferred to California State University Fullerton where I completed my bachelors in geological sciences. I recently began working at Heber Dunes SVRA as a State Park Interpretive Specialist. I enjoy being in the great outdoors whether it be an activity such as hiking or out having a blast riding! I am excited to be back where I started and to be a part of such a great team full of passionate and talented individuals.



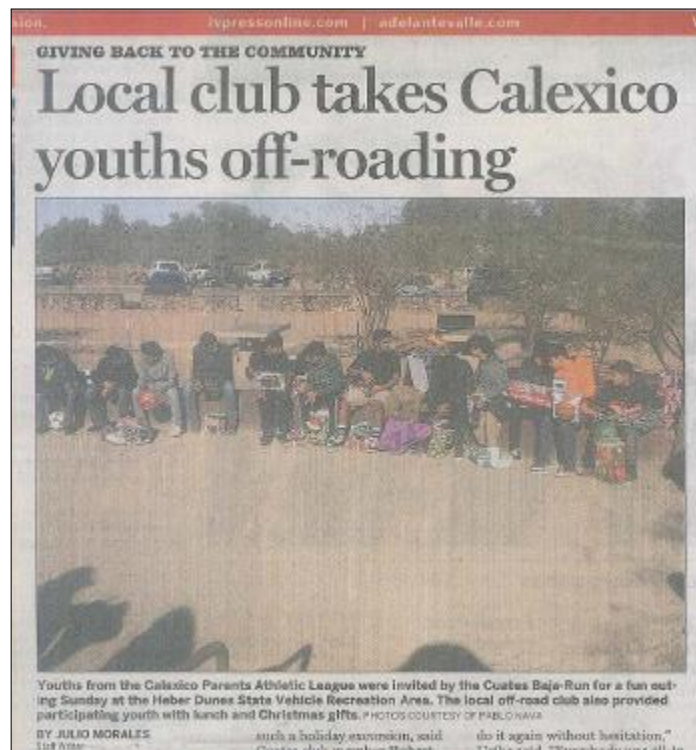
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# Heber Dunes Special Event

By James Claar, Supervising State Park Peace Officer

Extra! Extra! Heber Dunes SVRA made the front page of the Imperial Valley Press for a special event that was truly special! On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 22 kids of the Calexico Parents Athletic League were treated to a Holiday Excursion by the Cuates Baja-Run off-road club. The kids were provided with a meal and Christmas gifts that included ROV rides in the park. We were extremely happy to play hosts to this charity event that supports at-risk children. For more information check the article at [http://www.ivpressonline.com/news/local/off-road-club-takes-calexico-youths-off-beaten-path/article\\_b76deca2-c68d-11e6-899b-5f1fbb471148.html](http://www.ivpressonline.com/news/local/off-road-club-takes-calexico-youths-off-beaten-path/article_b76deca2-c68d-11e6-899b-5f1fbb471148.html)



# OW Holiday Donations

By Desiree Varela, Office Technician

What better way to start the New Year than giving to those in need? The OW team was able to collect over 450 items of clothing and dry or canned food for the 2016 Holiday Donations! A large portion of the proceeds were donated to Slab City, a makeshift community located just along the Salton Sea. Slab City serves as a home base for many families who were driven there by poverty.



The name stems from the “slabs” of concrete which remain from what was once a World War II training camp, and although the land is owned by the State of California, the community has no running water, electricity, sewer or trash pick-up service. In addition to our donations, our OW Team members Wanda Freeman, Kitty Gravett, Cheryl Schulz, and Desiree Varela joined efforts with Faith Assembly of El Centro, California, to distribute food and clothing to the people of Slab City. This experience allowed them to interact with local residents and gave them a firsthand look at the poverty occurring in the community.

“I was enlightened. You know that many in the community are homeless, but you don’t realize how hard they live day to day. They have

no running water or electricity. It was a rewarding experience.” – Kitty Gravett

“Hearing their stories of what drove them to that level of poverty was eye opening. You don’t realize just how good you have it and how that *is* reality for some people. It was a heartfelt experience that I will never forget.” – Desiree Varela



Together they were able to feed over 75 families within the struggling community. A portion of the proceeds were also donated to The Frugal Coyote Boutique and Resale Shop, a non-profit where every dollar directly benefits the Borrego Springs Children’s Center. Thank You to our OW Team members who participated in the 2016 Holiday Donations and made this charitable act possible!



# News from Anza-Borrego Desert State Park

By Dennis Stephen, District Interpretive Specialist

Interpretation in the Colorado Desert District continues to expand. We have posted the first episode of “VISTA: Parks from Ridge to River” to the Internet. New 360° videos have been added, including Hellhole Canyon in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and Varner Harbor Entrance at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. So far, the videos that have been posted are getting the message out about the parks in the Colorado Desert District. They have been viewed in more than 15 countries around the world.

At the Coachella Valley Preserve, State Parks was offered some space at an interpretive kiosk. We installed a poster telling the story of the Indio Hills Palms property.

The first set of interpretive trainings went well, with close to 30 attending the training for Walks and Talks. The interpretive trainings will continue in February with the following:

February 3rd, 10:00 a.m.—2:00 p.m. at the Anza-Borrego Visitor Center. This training will cover: Introduction, Purpose & Value, Communication, and Programs for Kids.

February 17th, 10:00 a.m.—2:00 p.m. at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park Visitor Center. This training will cover: Planning Programs, Campfire Programs, and Audio/Visual.

On December 1, 2016, approximately 35 people attended the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park dedication of more than 70 Wayside Interpretive Panels that were placed throughout the more than 600,000 acre park thanks to funding from Proposition 84. This project replaced old signs and added some new signs to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, providing a fresh new look, enhancing the visitor’s experience.



Dennis Stephen Providing Interpretive Training

Photo by Sam Webb



Photo by Dennis Stephen  
Indio Hills Palms Panel

Terry Gerson, District Services Manager, and Kathy Dice, Park Superintendent for Anza-Borrego Desert State Park began the dedication ceremony. Several guest speakers included Jennifer Rigby from The Acorn Group, who



## News from Anza-Borrego Desert State Park *continued...*

designed the Wayside Interpretive Panels, and Paul Riha from Stone Imagery, who manufactured and installed the signs.

We would like to thank Brian Ketterer, Chief, Southern Division; Norb Ruhmke, District Superintendent, Colorado Desert District; Jennifer Rigby, The Acorn Group; Paul Riha, Stone Imagery; and all of the people too numerous to mention who have contributed to the Wayside Interpretive Panel project.



Photo by Dennis Stephen

ABDSP Superintendent at the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Panel Dedication

## News from the ABDSP Visitor Center

By Sally Thériault, State Park Interpreter II

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park held a class in the fall for volunteers hoping to lead hikes and give interpretive programs as Volunteer Naturalists. Eight of our volunteers completed the national Association for Interpretation's 32-hour Certified Interpretive Guide class, and are now working hard preparing programs and enthusiastically leading hikes in the Park!

With recent rains (and the promise of more to come!), the staff and volunteers at the Visitor Center are gearing up for wildflower season, getting ready to welcome hordes of visitors. Our newest volunteers, those who graduated in our last few classes, are in for a new experience! They are certainly up to the challenge, so bring on the flowers (and flower-seekers)!



New ABDSP Naturalists

Two new rangers have arrived in the park over the last several months: Lauren Shoemaker, who is married to ranger Mike Shoemaker, is our new Badlands Ranger, and Carina Hammang, fresh out of the academy and field training, is in charge of our campgrounds. They are a great addition to our team!

# Discoveries at Holmes Camp

By Alex Napier, Archaeological Specialist, and Hayley Elsken, Archaeological Project Leader

For a long time, Holmes Camp has been a good place to set up camp and settle down for the night. It attracts Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) recreationists for its access to running water, wind breaks, and scenic view to the north and west. OHV recreationists are on a long list of people who have taken advantage of the comforts at Holmes Camp, including the family from which Holmes Camp got its name. The homestead claim was filed in 1934 by Burns Thomas Nelson, whose

daughter married Lew Holmes. Holmes took over the claim and built a house and agriculture fields on the property. The location where the current shade structures are built used to be a grapefruit orchard, and the line of tamarisks trees that protect campers from the wind used to protect the grapefruit trees. Today, the tamarisks are the only above-ground evidence that remains of the homestead.



Close up of water pipe cross-section

Recently, Ocotillo Wells employees dug a trench for a waterline from Holmes Camp to Toner employee housing to connect the wells at the two sites for additional water needs. Any ground-disturbing activities at Ocotillo Wells require an archaeologist to be present to monitor for underground artifacts or sites. During the trenching through Holmes Camp, two artifacts associated with the homestead were uncovered. The first item was a vertical wooden post with only a small corner visible. After dirt was brushed away from the sides, it became clearer that it was a railroad tie, standing on end. The railroad tie had been painted at some point while in use—maybe markings on a fence? Only a few feet away the trencher cut through a second artifact, a tubular object that may have been a water pipe. This pipe ran in the same direction as the tamarisk wind break. It contained fibers around the edges, sediments that were different from the surrounding soil, and small pieces of glass and metal.

Neither is what you might normally think of as an artifact, but the location and type of items uncovered give us archaeologists small snippets of physical information we did not have previously about the Holmes Homestead. Before, all of our knowledge of Holmes was based on agricultural fields and the placement of the house on paper maps, but now we can start to build a bigger picture of what the site looked like when it was in use, to help us better understand the past.



Railroad tie seen in trench wall

*(Continued on next page...)*

## Discoveries at Holmes Camp *continued...*

It is illegal and considered a misdemeanor to remove an artifact from the park or knowingly destroy an archaeological, paleontological, or historical site.

If you do find a historical object in the park:

1. Do not remove or move the item.
2. If possible, take a photograph and document GPS coordinates or at least identify the location on a map or aerial.
3. Notify a Parks employee or call the Cultural Resources Department at (760) 767-1326 or (760) 767-1321 as soon as possible.

## Meet Mardee ...

Hi, my name is Mardee Littrell, and I am a new park aide in the Interpretation Department. I'm from Valley Center, and have driven through Ocotillo Wells every summer when going to the Colorado River near Blythe. Since I was a little girl, I have loved the desert, and I'm excited to teach people about this unique state park.

I recently graduated from California State University Long Beach with a degree in Recreation and completed an internship at the Big Bear Discovery Center as an environmental educator intern. My favorite animal is the desert bighorn sheep, and I enjoy helping with conservation efforts, whether it be participating in the bighorn sheep count or maintaining the guzzlers.

Other hobbies of mine include jeeping (the most recent trip was up Berdoo Canyon from Coachella to Joshua Tree National Park), hiking and playing tennis. I've been playing tennis my entire life!

I'm looking forward to learning new programs and developing new ones this season, and having my passion for the desert come across in my work. Thank you for this great opportunity.

The Interpretation staff welcomes Mardee to their team!





# Trails News

By Brian Woodson, District Maintenance Chief

Last year, I brokered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Imperial County Office of Public Works under the former director William Brunet and the Department of Parks and Recreation's Ocotillo Wells District to repair one of the main entrances into Truckhaven.



Photo shows the rut size. The vehicle is centered in the original corridor area. The "road" just to the left is where visitors had to partially traverse the side slope.

installed parallel ditches to keep the water flowing away from the road. The surface was treated with lignin sulfonate to help bind the road base together and prevent any accelerated erosion. Temporary fencing and straw waddles were installed at the end of the project to help the side slopes stay firmed up and keep riders off them while the soils develop a crust for protection.



Photo of the work to be done looking down from the top end

The road initially had a gully running down the middle of the road corridor, forcing traffic to parallel it on the side hill. This kept "moving" the road further and further over, making it difficult for larger vehicles like RVs to get through to the mesa top. With the help from visiting State Park Equipment Operators, Adam Asche (Colorado Desert District) and Mike Willis (State-wide Equipment Operator), along with Dan Christensen, performed the lion's share of the work with heavy equipment and re-contoured the corridor back to its original alignment, crowned the surface and



Photo of interpretive sign kiosk area. Note the drainage just to the right of the sign.

The Trails crew provided the project site set-up by installing temporary safety fencing to cordon off the project site. They also saw cut the old asphalt to provide a clean edge with which to lock in the new road base aggregate. Later on, they "planted" excavated rocks on the side slope to help further deter riders from going up and down the side slopes paralleling the road work. Wrapping up the project,

*(Continued on next page...)*

## Trails News *continued...*

they installed some temporary wire fencing along each side of the road, which will be removed later after the side slopes have hardened up a bit.



From L-R, Ryan Walasek, Carlos Gales, Anthony Beepath, Ramiro Mandujano and Victor Garcia are installing the orange safety fencing around the vegetation that was being protected.



Andrew Jens and Rob Speicher use a gas-powered cut-off saw to create a "fresh" edge for our road base to lock into.



Adam Asche using our grader to create a new hinge point on the western edge of the road. Yes, that front tire is floating!



Mike Willis using our backhoe to break out the old asphalt at the entrance



Different angle of Adam on the hinge point.

*(Continued on next page...)*

# Trails News *continued...*



Adam using our skip loader to put the final touches on the entrance.



From L-R, Victor Garcia, Ramiro Mandujano, Pete Coy, Rob Speicher and Ryan Walasek



Carlos Gales using a vibratory plate compactor to compact the swales for drainage.



Concretions and rocks removed during the excavation were "planted" along the hillside to deter riders from going up and down the side slopes.

The finished product looking up from S-22





# Partnering with Audubon

By Sara Lockett, Environmental Scientist

In 2016, the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Division partnered with the Audubon Society to revise bird survey protocols, as needed, and discuss ways to document survey results that may be of more use to park management. As part of this partnership, Nicole Michel, with the Audubon Society, and Jerry Cole, representing The Institute for Bird Populations, visited Ocotillo Wells and Heber Dunes SVRAs in early January. Neither Nicole nor Jerry had previously been to either park, so their visit started off with a tour of each SVRA.

After the tour, Resources staff had a chance to meet with Nicole and Jerry to discuss strategies for future monitoring. While monitoring protocols won't change, Resources staff will be prioritizing the addition of fifteen new survey plots in 2017. Additionally, the most common bird species in each park will be represented in a statistical model that will incorporate factors such as vegetation, soil type, terrain, rainfall, and disturbance to estimate the presence and densities of these species.

While this partnership is still young, it promises exciting changes for the Resources Department moving forward.



Jerry Cole, with The Institute for Bird Populations (left), presenting at the 2016 OHMVR Division Natural Resources Conference. Photo by Katie Metraux.

# OHV Patrol & MSF Course

By Adam Borello, Supervising State Park Peace Officer

Ocotillo Wells Rangers and Desert Lifeguards have continued to increase the frequency of OHV patrol over the past several seasons. There are many benefits of OHV use over traditional patrol (street-legal) vehicles. For starters, they are capable of reaching nearly all areas of the park and in much less time. Also, we have found the ROV suspensions to be far superior to that of our patrol vehicles—just ask our backs!

There is one benefit that is hard to quantify, and that is the ability of our user group to more closely relate to us purely because we are patrolling on OHVs. We are constantly reminded of this benefit, however, when we mix with a crowd of OHV users while on patrol. People love seeing us on motorcycles and RZR's! We are regularly asked to pause for a photo with the public. People often don't recognize who we are for a little while, but once they do, they seem to be drawn to us. This does not happen when you are in a patrol vehicle.

Recently, we were fortunate enough that Ranger Brian Lincoln from Hungry Valley SVRA was available to come down out of the snow and instruct several of the Visitor Service's employees in Motorcycle Training. Ranger Lincoln, a Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) Instructor, provided exceptional training to Ranger Peter Estes (pictured) and Desert Lifeguards Cole Magro and Cameron Faris. Look for the three of them out in the park while you are on your next ride!



# New IC Trailer

By Andy Ahlberg, Sector Superintendent

When I first transferred to Ocotillo Wells in 2007, we had a very old OHMVR Division motorhome here. It was originally assigned to Division for outreach and other details, and I was never able to figure out how we ended up with it. The Desert Lifeguards used to take it out to Hidden Valley and Cross Over camp during busy weekends and holidays. At some point it developed some mechanical problems and went away. Then we ended up with an old toy hauler

trailer that needed a new floor; not sure where that came from either. It was used in a similar way for a season or two until it also went away. For years we went without any type of Incident



Command Trailer and had to depend on our friends up at Hungry Valley SVRA to lend us their IC Trailer during our big events and holidays. After several years of work, with the help of Brian Woodson and staff at OHMVR Division, Ocotillo Wells SVRA once again has an IC Trailer. The trailer was custom made in Sacramento by TPD Trailers who has a lot of experience making trailers for Law Enforcement and Emergency Services throughout the West Coast. The new trailer can transport one Razor and two motorcycles, and after it is empty,

provides space from which to stage during large incidents. There is still some work to be done; we are working with the Telecomm unit in Sacramento to get the radios installed, as well as exploring opportunities for low cost satellite connectivity that would allow for secure connections in even the most remote areas of the state. After many years, the Public Safety Staff is looking forward to having a platform in the field to support them while handling large Special Events, Search and Rescues, and Emergency Deployments.





# RZ Turbo

By Russ Fortin, State Park Peace Officer Supervisor

The Rangers recently added a Polaris RZR 1000 Turbo to the Patrol fleet. The vehicle was outfitted with emergency lights and sirens and set up to enable the Desert Lifeguards to respond to emergencies, as well as the Rangers.

The previously purchased RZR 1000s have proved to be fantastic vehicles for patrol and response to emergency situations. The vehicles are safely able to travel cross country just as fast, if not faster, than the traditional patrol vehicles on trails. These vehicles are also able to go easily into places that trucks and SUVs would find difficult, and even dangerous. While not as fast or as nimble as motorcycles, these vehicles can safely carry two first responders, as well as medical and law enforcement equipment, nearly anywhere a motorcycle can go.



# Sidewinder

By Craig Fischer, Environmental Scientist

The Colorado Desert Sidewinder (*Crotalus cerastes laterorepens*) is the only rattlesnake that is regularly found within OWSVRA. It is a small snake, with adults generally reaching about 12-18 inches. Like all rattlesnakes, the sidewinder is a pit viper, meaning that it uses two specialized organs near its face to see heat. This helps them locate prey or predators by revealing heat signatures in an otherwise cool environment. The sidewinder has a very unique means of locomotion to accommodate living in sandy environments—it moves its body sideways instead of in a linear fashion! (This link takes you to a video of a moving sidewinder: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZWYvkvKjHc>). As a viper, the sidewinder is armed with two front fangs that are used as conduits to deliver venom into prey.

The sidewinder typically feasts on kangaroo rats, which they attack in ambush. The snake finds a comfortable place to rest, coiled in what is known as a sleeping circle. This coiled position serves as an ambush spot, and the coil allows the animal to strike using maximum speed and power! Recently, researchers discovered that even with the advantage of surprise sidewinders successfully kill their prey in under 5% of strikes. This is partly because kangaroo rats have the ability to jump away from a snake faster than the speed of the strike. In some instances the kangaroo rats can even kick the mouth of the snake away in mid-air!



A neonatal female sidewinder in her sleeping circle on a cold morning



An adult sidewinder tucked beneath a big galleta grass

Rattlesnakes are misunderstood, causing many to fear them. A rattlesnake can be dangerous if provoked, but snakes in the desert southwest have no advantage over a human being that would cause them to pursue or attack a person unprovoked. Most rattlesnake bites occur when someone tries to hurt or kill the snake. Rattlesnakes are a key part of maintaining a healthy ecosystem, and are best left alone. If you find a sidewinder in the park, enjoy watching it side wind or rest in a sleeping circle, and then step slowly away. Remember, it has a tool on its tail to let you know if you've made it uncomfortable! Bzzzzzz!!!!!!!

# Follow Ocotillo Wells SVRA on Facebook!



Find updates on changes in the park, historic and modern park photos, reminders about policies and regulations, and the schedule for our various interpretive programs. What a great forum for visitors to communicate and connect.



Check it out and “Like” us...because, after all, we like you.

[www.facebook.com/OcotilloWellsSVRA](https://www.facebook.com/OcotilloWellsSVRA)

## Upcoming OW Festivals

Geology Daze! Geology Festival

February 18-20, 2017

Hot Stars & Heavenly Bodies Astronomy Festival

March 25, 2017

Bug-a-Palooza Bug Festival

April 1-2, 2017

Eggs-travaganza

April 16, 2017



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